



BERKSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Patron: The Late Queen

President: Professor Michael Fulford CBE FBA FSA

Teaching about Archaeology in the School Curriculum: A Guide for Primary Teachers

3. The Iron Age

a) Background information for teachers

[The National Curriculum highlights the importance of causes, connections, changes, similarities and contrasts, significance and use of historical terminology.]

For the Iron Age this could include Iron Age hill forts, tribal kingdoms, farming, art and culture. (DfE 2013: p3)

1. When was the Iron Age?

The Iron Age began in 800 BC (so nearly 3,000 years ago) and ended in AD 43 with the arrival of the Romans. (However, in Scotland and Ireland, the Iron Age continued for many years after the Romans arrived.)

2. What happened in the Iron Age?

- The skill of iron working arrived in Britain from Europe in about 800 BC. Bronze was still used, especially for fine ornamental items, but iron was harder and could be made into more effective tools and weapons.
- Towards the end of the Iron Age, coins were minted.
- The use of horses became widespread.
- By the end of the Iron Age, powerful local tribal leaders had emerged – for example Commius, leader of the Atrebates tribe based at Silchester in Hampshire.

The arts (such as music and poetry) were becoming a more important part of the culture – especially distinctive Celtic art forms and patterns.

3. What did the landscape in Berkshire look like in the Iron Age compared to today?

Much woodland had been cleared for farming so the landscape looked more open. Farms would have been common.

4. What was the climate in Berkshire like in the Iron Age?

Perhaps cooler and wetter than in the Bronze Age (and at the current time). At the end of the Iron Age the climate may have become a little warmer.

5. How did people live in the Iron Age?

Housing and buildings

People lived in large **round houses** made of wooden posts with wattle and daub walls, and thatch for roofs. There was a fire in the centre of the house for cooking and heat. The smoke percolated out through the thatch. The houses were on farms, or sometimes grouped together in small villages. A reconstruction can be seen at Butser Ancient Farm (Hampshire). In Chysauster (Cornwall) a settlement of original Iron Age stone houses can be seen and explored – the walls of these houses are still standing to above shoulder height.

Hill forts were also built. Most had deep ditches outside a high rampart which may have been topped with a palisade fence and walkway. The hill forts probably served several purposes but their structure implies that defence was very important. They might also have been used for social or ceremonial gatherings, or trading. The hill fort at Danebury in Hampshire, for example, exported grain to Europe. Round houses have been found inside hill forts, for example at Danebury and Maiden Castle (Dorset).

Farming

Farming implements such as axes and the cutting edges of ploughs (called ploughshares) were made of iron. They were more efficient so more food could be produced.

A variety of crops was grown including cereal crops (such as wheat and barley), and beans and cabbages. Cows, sheep, pigs and chickens were kept on farms

More food meant that the population size increased.

Technology

People were skilled at metal working – making swords and axes for example. Specialist metal working ‘smiths’ probably moved around between settlements. Pottery was made using clay kilns or open bonfires, and carpentry was practised (for house frames, furniture, tools and carts). Evidence of spinning and weaving, for instance spindle whorls and loom weights, is common in the Iron Age. Wood was used for fuel and heating and bread was made in clay ovens.

Trading

There were strong trading links over long distances, for example to continental Europe. A variety of goods was exchanged but metal ores – copper, tin, iron, were particularly important. At Danebury hill fort, grain was stored in deep pits before being exported to Europe. Wool was probably exported too. The sea was a busy trading route.

From 150 BC, coins were used in south-east Britain. These were minted at the large towns (oppida) such as Dyke Hills (Dorchester, Oxfordshire).

Religion

Gods were important, as were spirits and ancestors. Religious offerings, such as weapons, were made in many different places but especially in water. Caesar writes about the importance of the druids to local communities.

Generally, the bones of the deceased were buried in graves around the farms and villages. In the late Iron Age, in the south-east of England, bodies seem to have been cremated. Chariot burials have been found in east Yorkshire (at Wetwang Slack).

What clothes did people wear

There is a lot of evidence of spinning and weaving, so woven cloth was probably worn, as well as leather from animal hides.

What food did people eat

A variety of crops was grown so people could make food from cereal crops, including wheat and barley, and eat vegetables such as beans and cabbages. Bread was baked in clay ovens. Cows, sheep, pigs and chickens were kept on farms and provided meat for eating.

6. Why did the Iron Age end?

Julius Caesar arrived in Britain in 55 BC but did not conquer any land. He made contacts and extended Rome's sphere of influence into Britain. The Romans invaded Britain later - in AD 43. The Iron Age ended in the parts of Britain that the Romans conquered. These areas then became a province of the Roman Empire for almost the next 400 years.

7. What evidence is there of Iron Age people living in Berkshire?

- Just over the border in Hampshire, an Iron Age settlement lies underneath the Roman town of Silchester. This Iron Age town was the centre of a tribal group called the Atrebates. The tribe minted very distinctive coins.
- The Alton Hoard. This hoard of gold pieces was not found in Berkshire – but very close by in Hampshire. It is in the British Museum in London.
- The Syngenta Hoard was a collection of 58 gold coins found at Jealots Hill, just north of Bracknell. It can be seen in Reading Museum. (Acquisition number *Redng1999.167*)
- The Wokefield hoard. A collection of 8 gold coins minted by the Atrebates at Silchester in the late Iron Age (60-20 BC) and found at Wokefield Park. The hoard can be seen in West Berkshire Museum.

b) Resources to support teaching about the Iron Age with particular reference to Berkshire.

In this section we have listed places and websites where information about the Iron Age in Berkshire can be found. These are divided into:

- i) Museums
- ii) Websites
- iii) Practical activities
- iv) Places to visit

i) Museums

West Berkshire Museum and the Berkshire Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The resources for learning about the Iron Age in Berkshire at the West Berkshire Museum are set out in the table below. They include resources provided by the Berkshire Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) which is a scheme managed by the British Museum and which describes, dates and records archaeological objects that people have found in the local area. The Berkshire PAS officer is based at the West Berkshire Museum.

(NB data below current at 2021)

Type of resource	Details	Where located	contact
Static displays *Guided visits available *Self-guided visits available	Free self-guided visit to West Berkshire Museum's permanent exhibition, Lives and Landscapes, which includes a prehistory section. Guided visits of the permanent exhibition available on request. 'Design a Museum Tour' led session for KS2/3 focuses on the objects in the permanent exhibition. Museum only session (on a Monday or Tuesday). It costs £45 for a class of up to 30 children and the session is about 2 hours in duration. Session includes activity sheets.	West Berkshire Museum	Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk
Artefacts *Available to handle at school *Available to handle at another location. *Loan boxes	One Iron Age loan box, containing real and replica objects as well as teacher notes on the objects, available to borrow for a three week period (£15 per box). Must be collected/returned by a school representative from/to the Museum on the agreed dates/times.	West Berkshire Museum	Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk

Printed pupil learning materials (eg activity sheets) *Free *Available to purchase	Free and/or paid for (50p) trails of the Museum's permanent exhibition.	West Berkshire Museum	Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk
Electronic pupil learning materials (eg videos, you tube, emailed documents etc)	West Berkshire Heritage's lifelong learning webpage with various free and downloadable resources, some of which focus on prehistory: www.westberkshireheritage.org/life-long-learning	West Berkshire Heritage website	West Berkshire Museum Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk
Location of Iron Age features in Berkshire	Details of Iron Age sites in West Berkshire's Historic Environment Record available online on the Heritage Gateway: www.heritagegateway.org.uk (instructions on using it here: https://info.westberks.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=36550&p=0), West Berkshire Council's online map: https://gis2.westberks.gov.uk/webapps/OnlineMap or by contacting the Archaeology Service: https://info.westberks.gov.uk/her. Iron Age artefacts found by members of the public and recorded with the Portable Antiquities Scheme available online here: https://finds.org.uk/database/search/advanced	West Berkshire Archaeology Service Portable Antiquities Scheme	Assistant Archaeologist (HER and Outreach): archaeology@westberks.gov.uk Berkshire Finds Liaison Officer: Philip.Smith1@westberks.gov.uk
Further information available on website	Details of the Museum and Learning and Participation Service can be found here: www.westberkshireheritage.org Details of the Archaeology Service can be found here: www.westberkshireheritage.org/local-heritage and here: https://info.westberks.gov.uk/lookingintothePast	West Berkshire Museum West Berkshire Archaeology Service	Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk Assistant Archaeologist (HER and Outreach): archaeology@westberks.gov.uk

	Details of the Portable Antiquities Scheme Finds Liaison Officer for Berkshire can be found here: www.westberkshireheritage.org/local-heritage/portable-antiquities-scheme and here: https://finds.org.uk/counties/berkshire	Portable Antiquities Scheme	westberks.gov.uk Berkshire Finds Liaison Officer: Philip.Smith1@westberks.gov.uk
Other information	Family craft activities (e.g. Messy Museum Days) during the school holidays are history-based and sometimes focus on prehistory: www.westberkshireheritage.org/whats-on Archaeology craft activities during the school holidays and the annual Festival of Archaeology sometimes focus on the Iron Age.	West Berkshire Museum West Berkshire Archaeology Service	Learning and Participation Officer: clare.bromley@westberks.gov.uk Assistant Archaeologist (HER and Outreach): archaeology@westberks.gov.uk

Reading museum

The resources for learning about the Bronze Age in Berkshire at the Reading Museum are set out in the table below.

Type of resource	details	contact
Static displays Self-guided visits available	Free self-guided visits to Reading Museum's galleries which include a prehistory and Natural History section.	Learning Team: Museum.education@reading.gov.uk
Artefacts *Available to handle at school *Available to handle at another location. *Loan boxes	Iron Age loan boxes, containing real objects as well as teacher notes on the objects, available to borrow and use in school for a period of half a term. Delivery and collection service is suspended due to COVID restrictions: all boxes must be collected/returned by a school representative from/to the Museum on the agreed dates/times. Current price £45 per box per half term (September 2021-August 2022. Up to date pricing on RM's website); membership agreements available (See https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/school-loan-boxes for details)	Learning Team: Museum.education@reading.gov.uk

	“Prehistory” session for primary schools. Led by experienced session leaders in the prehistory gallery in the Museum. The session lasts 1 hour and 45 minutes and includes object handling and activities. Current fee £150 per session for a max of 35 children (September 2021-August 2022. Up to date pricing on RM’s website). See https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/prehistory for details. “Prehistory” virtual session for primary schools. Available from Spring Term 2022. This virtual version of the session is delivered live by one of the museum’s learning officers. It includes videos, activities, 3D objects virtual handling and it is supported by a teacher pack of resources to be used before during and after the virtual session. The session lasts 1 hour, and it costs £75 for a class of max 35 children (current price, September 2021-August 2022. Up to date pricing on RM’s website). For more information on virtual session see https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools/virtual-sessions)	
Electronic pupil learning materials (eg videos, you tube, emailed documents etc)	Pdf notes of all our loan boxes are available to download for free from our database. No purchase necessary. Teachers can search for prehistory boxes at http://schoolloans.readingmuseum.org.uk/ and simply download the information.	Learning Team: Museum.education@reading.gov.uk
Support material for teachers (eg teachers packs) *printed *electronic	The Museum Website publishes regularly blogs on a variety of subjects. https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/blog/ Downloadable teachers pack available as part of our “Prehistory” Virtual Session. (see “Artefacts” section)	Learning Team: Museum.education@reading.gov.uk
Further information available on website	Details of Reading Museum Learning Services can be found here: https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools	Learning Team: Museum.education@reading.gov.uk

Other museums

Resources to support pupils' learning about the Iron Age can also be found in the following museums:

- Silchester gallery, Reading Museum
- Museum of the Iron Age in Andover
- Devizes Museum

ii) Useful Websites

- British Museum <https://www.britishmuseum.org/learn/schools>
- Berkshire Archaeological Society <https://www.berksarch.co.uk>
- Marlow Archaeological Group <http://www.marlowarch.co.uk>
- South Oxfordshire Archaeological Society <https://www.soagarch.org.uk>
- Reading Museum <https://www.readingmuseum.org.uk/schools>
- Maidenhead Heritage Centre <https://www.maidenheadheritage.org.uk>
- West Berkshire Museum <https://www.westberkshireheritage.org>
- Windsor Museum <https://www.windsormuseum.org.uk>

Portable antiquities scheme. Philip Smither - Berkshire finds officer.

<https://finds.org.uk/counties/berkshire/finds-through-the-ages-the-neolithic-period-in-berkshire/>

iii) Practical activities.

Finds boxes.

These allow pupils to practice excavating and handling the artefacts they find. Pupils can identify, draw and record their findings. Finds boxes are provided by some museums (for instance West Berkshire Museum and Reading Museum - see details in section 2b above) and some archaeological societies, or you can make up your own.

iv) Places to visit

Iron Age hill forts can be seen and visited at:

- Caesar's Camp, Bracknell (with a single rampart and ditch). Grid reference GU863657
- Walbury Hill fort, Combe, Inkpen. Grid reference SU 374617
- Blewburton Hill, near Blewbury village (Oxfordshire). Grid reference SU 547862
- Grimsby Castle – a large hill fort in woodland, near Hermitage. Grid reference SU512723
- Dyke Hills. A large Iron Age fort and town near Dorchester (Oxfordshire).

Silchester: The Iron Age town lies under the Roman town. (The site can be visited but the Iron Age town is not visible).

Butser Ancient farm has a reconstruction of a Bronze Age house and buildings from other ages

<https://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk>